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## CHAPTER 1.0

### INTRODUCTION

San Diego County is widely known for its beautiful coastline with miles of beaches, near-perfect year-round weather, and a vast array of recreational opportunities available for the outdoor enthusiast. The incredible diversity of natural open spaces within the county contributes much to making San Diego a unique and desirable place to live, work, and recreate. The county contains within its borders hundreds of miles of shoreline; coastal canyons, rolling foothills and rugged mountains; streams, rivers, and lakes; and even a vast expanse of desert. Nowhere else in the United States can you see such a variety of scenery, all within an easy day trip from one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country.

#### 1.1 TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

##### 1.1.1 General Description

The current trail opportunities are plentiful and varied and showcase the scenic splendor of the many parks, open spaces, cultural resources, and wilderness areas of the region. The region is graced with nearly ideal weather for all trail activities on most days of the year. Residents have, within reasonable access, every imaginable trail opportunity; from coastal boardwalks, to nature trails in city parks, to isolated trails up high mountain peaks and through desert lands.

“With the expenditure of less than two hours driving time and one or two hours walk, a San Diego urbanite can reach any of a dozen totally different natural environments, ranging from snowy mountain peaks and fern-bedecked streams to sculpted desert badlands. Nowhere else in America is such a broad range of natural environments so close and conveniently located, and so available year-round to a large population.” (Schad, 1998) *Afoot and Afield in San Diego County*, a San Diego guidebook first published in 1986, contains descriptions of 220 hiking routes in over 350 pages of general and specific trail and travel-related information.

The existence of such a publication serves to highlight the opportunities that abound for trail users in San Diego County. Many existing county parks and open space preserves have extensive trail systems and many municipalities are developing and expanding their current trail and pathway systems.

Countywide there are over 1,400 miles of existing trails. These trails are found on state and federal lands, county lands, and lands within the various cities in the County. Many jurisdictions are involved in planning, developing, and maintaining public, non-motorized recreational trails.

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Many of these agencies were contacted during the research for this Trail Needs Assessment in order to more fully understand the state of trail planning in the county of San Diego (see Appendix A, Research Resource List). Over half of the cities in the county have General Plan policies concerning trails, and many have associated maps and design guidelines for trail development.

The county also has several existing trails located at least partially within its boundaries that are identified as having state or national significance. The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCT) is one such trail established by an Act of Congress in 1968. It begins at the Mexican border near Tecate and continues north over 2,600 miles to the Canadian border. Additional trails of statewide significance are discussed in Chapter 2.

Walking and hiking are consistently ranked among the most popular outdoor activities in state and national surveys on recreational activities. More and more residents are calling for convenient trails and are aware of the health and transportation benefits that trails can provide. Other trail activities such as mountain biking and horseback riding are also popular, particularly in San Diego, because of the mild climate and existing trail opportunities.

### **1.1.2 Anticipated Growth and Need**

Although trail opportunities in San Diego County seem limitless, the burgeoning population is already taking its toll on the trails. The experience of the trails is changing, as unincorporated areas that were once considered remote are blossoming with suburban growth. Many western wilderness areas are likewise becoming increasingly threatened by development. Time is of the essence as the county is rapidly losing open space opportunities as the region's population continues to grow steadily.

Countywide, approximately 42 percent population growth is anticipated over the next 20 years. This growth will require expansion of public facilities and services in order to satisfy the additional population. Trails will also feel the impact of this growth and, like all public facilities, will need to be expanded to accommodate the population. Trails that are close-in and easily accessible will be especially important to focus on for planning efforts and expansion that will have the greatest positive impact for the population base.

The biological term “carrying capacity” is used in the study of the growth of a natural system. The carrying capacity of an ecosystem is a level of growth of a given population that the environment can sustain indefinitely. Natural systems reach their carrying capacity and stabilize, or a dramatic decline in a population will occur in order to reach a balance within the ecosystem. This term could also be applied to trails. The “carrying capacity” of trails would relate the quantity of users to the number of available trails. Trails are often viewed as places to escape

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from the hectic pace of daily life. In order to achieve this need among the populace, they must provide a reprieve and a change from the crowded experience of, for example, our highways and shopping centers. When trails become overused they no longer provide the same benefit or experience level for the user. It is important to understand this concept so that current planning efforts can account for the future growth of the population and continue to provide adequate public service opportunities. This can lead to a stable and manageable system, even with a great deal of human growth and influence.

## **1.2 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT**

This County Trail System Assessment is intended to provide a full and fair discussion addressing trail needs, planning opportunities, funding, implementation methods, and potential management structure. The collective purpose of this assessment is to help direct the County's trail implementation efforts as the County develops the General Plan 2020 update. The culmination of this effort is intended to establish a framework to address trail planning for the next 20 years and incorporate a balanced regard for trail needs of the general public with the ability to improve and provide an expanded trail system in the county of San Diego.

### **1.2.1 History of Trail Planning in the County**

The history of trail planning in the county is varied and dates back to the mid '70s. A unified plan and focused approach was not established, and a Regional Map was in effect for only six years in the late 1970s. In 1982 the plan was repealed and the General Plan text regarding trails was modified. The existing General Plan chapter on trails is still limited in its ability to support the management structure and financial support needed for the implementation/expansion of a coordinated County Trail System.

The County Board of Supervisors (the Board) has initiated additional policies, outside of the General Plan, in more recent years. In the early 1990s, one such direction involved the formation of a Trails Committee, which comprised various interest groups and was intended to provide input on regional trails policy. The Trails Committee met over a nine-month period and discussed the idea of a Regional and Community/Sub-Regional Plan Trail Program. The Committee's comments were incorporated into a Board of Supervisors Policy establishing criteria for the development and operation of a trails and pathways plan. Over the past decade, there have been attempts to improve the Trail Program but a lack of funding, committed resources, and supportive general plan structure caused continued delays and stagnation.

In the fall of 2000 the Board of Supervisors affirmed that "recreational trails are a legitimate form of public recreation the County should provide." This decision was the first step of a three-

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step decision-making process and initiated development of a Trails Strategic Plan. The second step involves development of information and data specific to San Diego County, and the identification of Trail Program options for the Board's consideration. This Trail System Assessment is a major component of the second step. This County Trail System Assessment will identify the needs of trail users, opportunities and constraints associated with trail implementation, funding issues, and will produce trail system options. The third and final step will involve modifications to the goals and policies of the General Plan and development of implementation criteria based on direction received from the Board. The planning and implementation documents as well as management structure that ultimately result from this process will provide long-term planning guidance and establish programmatic resources.

The entire Strategic Trail Plan is intended to address trail planning, funding, implementation, and management. This Trail System Assessment addresses these elements and provides a fundamental understanding of the need for trails in the county and provides the options for satisfying that need.

An additional important initiative for the County is a change in the overall approach to trails planning, from a regional "top down" process to a community-based "grounds up" process that will be coordinated with General Plan 2020. A balance between establishing reasonable countywide trail goals and encouraging individual community-based trail development is needed.

As part of this current planning effort, a cross-functional management team has been formed. This team combines resources from the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), the Department of Planning and Land Use (DPLU), and the Department of Public Works (DPW). The intent of this team is to involve key departments throughout the planning process update so that at the conclusion, trails will be more easily coordinated, implemented, managed and supported. This management team is laying the groundwork that could lead to a strengthened and significantly improved County Trail Program.

### **1.2.2 Vision for Trails in the County of San Diego**

The stated goal for trails in the existing General Plan (as well as many of the existing Community Plans) is to "establish and protect an enjoyable, efficient, and safe network of public riding and hiking trails." This goal remains an accurate expression of general community policies and this assessment aims to strengthen and reinforce the overall goal. Additional recommendations will be outlined and will lead to the creation of new General Plan language for trails.

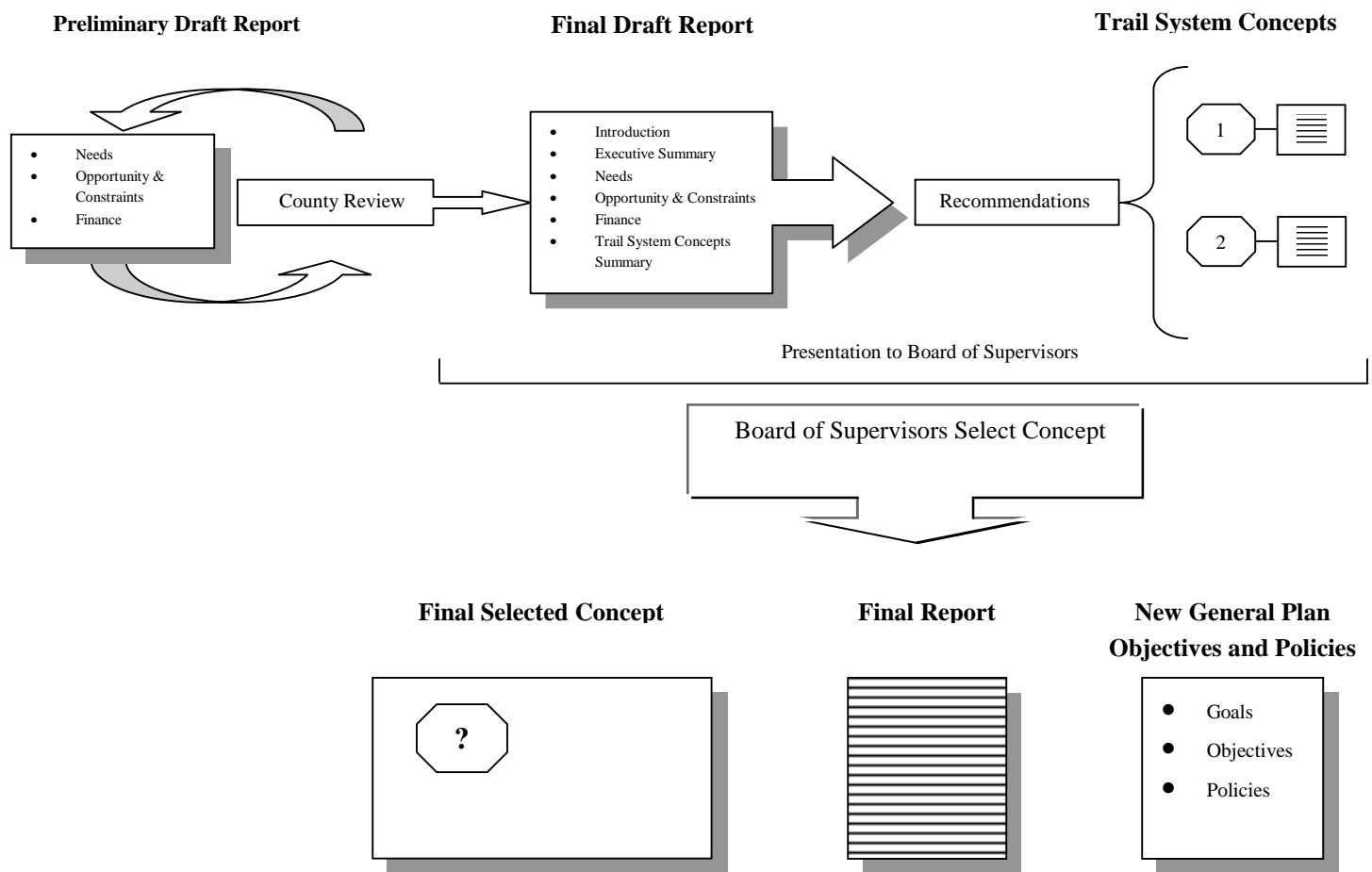
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The vision for the County's Trail Program should be to identify, implement and also maintain a realistic and achievable trail system. This system should effectively meet the needs of county residents and consider both regional and community trails allowing for hiking, biking, and horseback riding opportunities. The Trail Program should respect private property rights and balance possible constraints associated with various land uses and environmental issues during planning efforts. The program should generally consist of two trail types. The first of these trail types should be long distance linear trails that are regional in nature. The second type is for "close-in" trails that consist of a local network of trails that are in close proximity to the population centers, are convenient and easily accessible. All of the trails should look for opportunities to provide for a wide variety of qualitative trail experiences. This effort should be possible given the County Board of Supervisor's new "bottom up" approach to examine and satisfy the trail needs of the communities. This assessment also provides the Board an overview for the need to participate in a long distance linear Regional Trail System that relates to existing and planned trails in the region.

### **1.2.3 Trail System Assessment Methodology**

This Trail System Assessment provides an overview of the variables that affect existing and future need for trails in San Diego County. It will be the foundation for a Strategic Trail Plan and related policies for the Public Facilities Element of General Plan 2020 update. The overall components of the Trail System Assessment and the methodology, as shown in Figure 1-1, included the following efforts:

- Conducted surveys to get an impression of the level of satisfaction that residents currently have with trails and to begin to understand who uses the trails.
- Conducted trail inventory to establish the existing and planned trails within the county of San Diego.
- Prepared trail definition and guidelines for future trail planning and design efforts.
- Determined possible future trail demand and needs for the residents within the county of San Diego.
- Evaluated opportunities and constraints of numerous issues that would affect future trail planning efforts.
- Evaluated financial considerations to establish the fiscal opportunities that will be needed to support a Trail Program
- Prepared Trail System Concepts illustrating different methodologies to implement a Trail Program within the County's General Plan.



**Figure 1-1: Trail System Assessment Project Process**

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The report also outlines and analyzes two (2) Strategic Trail System Concepts. The concepts range from working within the General Plan to creating a stand-alone Trail Master Plan document with associated maps and design guidelines. Trails on public lands versus trails on public and private lands are additional distinctions between the concepts.

The Trail System Assessment recommends ways to satisfy a number of trail planning needs and provides a San Diego-specific trail resource manual that the County can reference as the Strategic Trail Plan process continues.

#### **1.2.4 Trail Needs Assessment**

The purpose of the Trail Needs Assessment is to assess the level of service being provided by existing trails and compare that to the level of demand. The assessment includes surveys, summarizing Federal and State recreational reports on the benefits of trails, and community input to determine current needs of trail users in the county. A summary of the benefits of trails, and an analysis of the County's projected population growth and its relationship to trail needs are also provided. Definitions of trail types, including general recommendations for future design guidelines, are identified. Trail programs of other jurisdictions are also discussed. The synthesis of this information leads to recommendations for Trail Program goals, General Plan policies and policy implementation strategies.

#### **Surveys**

Three local survey methods were used to get an impression of the level of satisfaction that residents currently have with trails and to begin to understand who uses the trails. Users' needs, preferences, and general opinions were gathered to provide a snapshot of trail use and needs in the county.

The surveys were completed within a limited time frame (December and January, 2000-2001) in order to incorporate the findings into the Trail Needs Assessment. The General Plan 2020 process has dictated the assessment timeline. The aim is for the document to be reviewed by the Board in time to influence and/or provide a basis for the General Plan revision of goals and policies relating to trails in the county.

In addition, a comprehensive review and update of the surveys every five years, with the surveys occurring over a one-year period of time, is recommended. This will ensure that the County remains on target regarding trail needs and provides a more accurate picture of the impact of future planning efforts and the effect of variables such as the impact of city residents on trails in

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the unincorporated region of the county. Mail-out surveys, phone surveys, and field surveys in all seasons and at various locations should be included in future survey efforts.

In addition to trail use surveys, the County has initiated a process to gather the input of planning groups. All of the Community Planning and Sponsor Groups were asked about their interest in having or expanding trails in their areas, as well as the preferred locations.

## **Trail Benefits**

State and national surveys are cited to substantiate the benefits of trails. The benefits include recreational, economic, educational, environmental, transportation, historical, cultural, health, and quality of life aspects. Most people accept that trails have many benefits for society, and this portion of the Trail Needs Assessment provides a concise list of benefits and a variety of sources. This will be useful in supporting future planning efforts.

## **Trail Needs**

A quantitative need for trails is established by examining existing population patterns and trail availability. A baseline projects future trail needs based upon population growth expected. The projections are related to growth within each Community/Subregional Plan Area and provide the County with a numerical guide for community trail planning efforts.

## **Trail Definitions and Design Guidelines**

Within this section different trail types are outlined and defined. The variety and type of trail experiences that should be considered is also provided and defined. A descriptive list of items to include within the design guidelines, as well as recommended definitions to use as a basis for planning efforts, are included.

### **1.2.5 Opportunities and Constraints**

The purpose of this section is to identify, determine, and analyze opportunities and constraints that might affect the implementation of future trails within the county, such as land use, ownership, transportation, and environmental and cultural elements. In addition to the opportunities and constraints analysis, this section also includes acquisition options and methodology for acquiring private lands for trail implementation. This section also provides an analysis of nexus and proportionality issues. The final portion of this section defines possible enforcement and management issues that will need to be addressed as the Trail Program is prepared. The conclusion of this information leads to the creation of recommendations that



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would be appropriate for future policy implementation and long-term success of a Countywide trail strategy.

### **1.2.6 Financial Considerations**

This section addresses the financial implications of planning, implementing, constructing, managing and maintaining a network of trails within the county of San Diego. The report outlines several key issues that deal with the cost of trail implementation (construction and maintenance), funding sources, financial methods and possible incentives for future trail dedication. The financial section identifies funding sources into two (2) areas of opportunities. The two are federal, state and local funding sources with a moderate to high potential and a low potential for application for trails.

### **1.2.7 Strategic Trail Systems Concepts**

In establishing a Trail System Concept that would best meet the challenges and issues that could confront a Trail Program, the Board of Supervisors will need to balance the overall needs for a successful trail system with specific issues relating to trail implementation. The Trail System Concepts provided here utilize the broad conclusions and recommendations that were developed in the previous chapters as their foundation. The following two (2) Trail System Concepts could be implemented with various degrees of success of achieving these overall recommendations related to needs, opportunities and constraints and financial considerations.

Each option provides a different methodology for implementing a Trail Program and consists of the following general concepts:

- \$ Concept 1: New County Trail Program/Policy – Trails on Public and Private Land
- \$ Concept 2: New County Trail Program/Policy – Trails on Public Lands Only

The primary differences between each concept are two-fold. The options either use public or public and private lands for trail implementation, and the options use or modify the existing County program/policies or propose a new program/policies for a Trail Program.

Each option defines the general concept for the trail methodology and then establishes specific strategies. The strategies provide a list of recommendations for future Trail Program implementation. Each of the options, strategies, and recommendations could then be used for goals, policies and objectives within the General Plan to support that concept.

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Every concept proposes a Program Implementation Model to define the methodology for how the Trail Program would work within the General Plan and a Management Structure/Model for the Trail Program. It is anticipated that the Board of Supervisors will select one of the concepts, implementation models and management structures provided within this chapter. The selected elements will then be the basis for the final trail system option for inclusion into the General Plan 2020 update.

### **1.3 IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS**

Definitions for this Trail System Assessment are critical to every chapter and have therefore been included within this introduction. In many ways, these definitions establish the basis for the document and must be understood prior to reading the following chapters. A glossary of terms is also provided in Appendix B.

#### **1.3.1 Trails and Pathways**

##### **Trails**

Trails are off-road non-motorized paths that are primarily recreational in nature but can also serve as an alternative mode of transportation. They are soft-surface facilities, provided for single or multiple uses, which are developed for pedestrians, bicyclists, equestrians and other non-motorized users. Trail characteristics vary depending on location and user types.

##### **Regional Trails**

In San Diego County there is an extensive system of long-distance trails that should logically be classified as Regional Trails. Some of these trails exist and are currently being used, operated and maintained. Other portions of these trails are in various states of planning, implementation and completion. The planning for a majority of these long distance trails have been in the process for some time and generally have the conceptual support and approval by the local and public agencies associated with them.

These trails (existing or proposed) provide connections that cross borders of plan areas and sometimes connect with various cities in the region. Regional Trails can also provide important connections to existing parks and open space preserves. Several Regional Trails extend beyond the boundaries of the county and have state or national significance.

Regional Trails provide a myriad of experiences for the user. They cover terrain ranging from the coastline to rugged mountains to gentle sloping hills. They provide trail experiences in

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urban, suburban, and wilderness settings. These trails should have, and often do have, considerable staging areas and facilities to accommodate heavy use and a variety of users.

At present, there are five existing and proposed trail systems within the county that should be considered “candidates” for regional trail designation. Completing these trails should be a top priority and can be done in a couple of ways. One would be to complete the “missing” segments of these trails that occur within the county. The other would be to possibly participate with other jurisdictions in completing the segments that are outside of the county. Providing connections to other, community or sub-regional type trails should also be a priority, as this will allow for more residents to easily utilize these existing or proposed long-distance trails.

### **Community Trails**

Trails that serve specific community areas are more localized, but still offer a variety of experiences and settings. Ideally, these trails should be easily accessible by the local populations and should attempt to connect to Regional Trails wherever feasible.

Many communities feel strongly that their trails should be expanded, while others are content with the existing quantity provided. This indicates that Community Trails must be approached in an entirely different manner from the Regional Trails discussed above. Locations of future Community Trails should be based upon input from community groups. This assessment also addresses how the County could establish a baseline quantity of Community Trails to provide per the population growth projections for the next 20 years.

### **Pathways**

Pathways are non-motorized transportation facilities located within or adjacent to existing road rights-of-way. They can range from a separated, soft-surface, single track near a rural road to a widened decomposed-granite shoulder intended for bike, hike, and equestrian use. Pathways are intended to serve both circulation and recreation purposes. They provide a different experience from trails and are not an acceptable substitute; however, pathways help make critical connections and are an integral part of a functional trail system.

### **Multiple-Use Trails**

Multiple-use, or multi-use type trails are the most common type of non-motorized trail facility. Multi-use trails are not restricted to a single user group; there are a variety of users that include pedestrians, bicyclists and equestrians. Construction of a single trail providing multiple uses, rather than three separate restricted use trails, is typically less expensive to build and maintain

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because of the shared use. Multi-use trails can also receive more intense use within a limited space. In many cases this is the only feasible way to implement a trail system that is limited in financial resources. To work well, multi-use trails need to integrate different user types on the same trail with minimal user conflict.

### **Single Use or Restricted Use Trails**

Single use or restricted use trails typically accommodate a single user type and/or restricts a user type from a trail. Single use trails for hikers has the smallest tread width and typically would be the least expensive trail type to construct.

### **Baseline/Level of Service**

The concept of “level of service” is defined as the County’s ability to provide a specified service to an acceptable standard for residents. Levels of service are established, for example, for police, fire, and emergency medical service locations to provide adequate response time and security coverage. They are also commonly used to determine the amount of park land needed to adequately meet the public’s recreational needs. This Trail System Assessment is charged with defining an acceptable level of service for trails (which would include pathways) in the county. Qualitative as well as quantitative variables are discussed in the process of defining an acceptable level of service that would be considered a baseline.

The term “baseline” is used in the discussion of the quantitative or numerical minimum standard goal the County should try to provide (i.e., number of trails per 1,000 residents). Chapter 2 explores various ways to obtain a baseline and concludes that the County should use a baseline that relates the existing population to readily accessible trails.

### **General Trail Alignment**

The term “general alignment” is used in identifying the location for a future trail. It is intended to describe the trail location within a designated area or buffer so that the specific alignment can be determined as the construction project proceeds. This term is especially useful in planning so that the property owners and responsible parties have flexibility in determining the final and precise trail location.

### **Trail Program**

The Trail Program includes all aspects of the County’s commitment and vision for trails. It incorporates all General Plan text, policies, master plans, implementation documents, operational

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and administrative guidelines, as well as all personnel and other resources dedicated to the program.

## **Trail Easement**

An “easement” is a term for the allowed use of property, the ownership of which is retained by the property owner, rather than deeded to the County.

## **Trail Segments**

Trail segments include individual pieces or sections of trail that are part of a general trail alignment.

### **1.3.2 San Diego County**

For the purposes of this document, *San Diego County* is defined as the region, including the county and all the cities located within its boundaries. San Diego County is comprised of incorporated areas, which include cities located primarily in the western portion of the county, and unincorporated areas, which are located mostly in the central and eastern portion of the county.

San Diego County is 2.7 million acres in land size and has a population of approximately 2.8 million people. The county ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in population of California Counties according to 2000 Census data. Also based on the 2000 census data, the City of San Diego has the second largest population of cities in the state after Los Angeles, and is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest city nationwide.

### **1.3.3 The County of San Diego**

For the purposes of this assessment, *The County of San Diego* is defined as the unincorporated region of the county and does not include the cities that make up the incorporated portion of the county. The focus of this report is the County of San Diego, but the incorporated cities are included in various discussions for comparison, and because they have an obvious impact on trail use.

### **1.3.4 Incorporated**

The incorporated area of San Diego County includes 18 cities located in the western portion of the county (Figure 1-2). The City of San Diego is the County’s largest city, both in terms of land area and population. Other incorporated cities in the county of San Diego are Carlsbad, Chula

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Vista, Coronado, Del Mar, El Cajon, Encinitas, Escondido, Imperial Beach, La Mesa, Lemon Grove, National City, Oceanside, Poway, San Marcos, Santee, Solana Beach, and Vista.

### **1.3.5 Unincorporated**

The unincorporated area of San Diego County comprises 84 percent of the total land area, while only 16 percent of the 2.8 million inhabitants reside in this area.

The unincorporated region of the county includes:

- 24 Community and Subregional Plan Areas, which have established geographical planning boundaries (Figure 1-3).
- In general, Community Planning Groups represent Community Plan Areas and Sponsor Groups represent a portion or all of Sub-regional Plan Areas. These groups serve an advisory role to the County's Board of Supervisors.
- There are 15 Community Planning Groups (Figure 1-4) and these representatives are elected by public vote. There are 11 Sponsor Groups (Figure 1-5) and the Board of Supervisors appoints these representatives.

### **1.3.6 SANDAG (San Diego Association of Governments)**

SANDAG plays an important role in planning and coordination efforts in San Diego County. All cities and the County have representatives on an executive board committee. Members of the board conduct research for regional level decisions. SANDAG's sphere of influence includes countywide population growth projections and transportation projects that cross boundaries of the members' jurisdictions. SANDAG is an important regional decision-maker and has made strides in encouraging and promoting cooperative efforts between the many government agencies that are stakeholders in the county. SANDAG works in concert with the cities and the County and provides a neutral ground to encourage compromise on many planning issues.

### **1.3.7 General Plan and Policies**

California State law requires the preparation and adoption of a General Plan, which provides the basis for rational decision-making regarding long-term development. The General Plan acts as a "constitution" for development by expressing community development goals and embodying public policy relative to the distribution of future land uses, both public and private. In order to

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reflect changing socio-economic, demographic, physical, and functional conditions and changes in the aspirations of the residents, a General Plan requires regular updates.

The current General Plan for the County of San Diego was initiated in 1979 and has been modified significantly over the past 20 years. The County of San Diego, as well as many cities located in the county, is currently in the process of updating its General Plan for the year 2020. Two different population projections were used for this report. The future population projection for the unincorporated area is the preferred target being used by the County in the General Plan update. SANDAG projections for future population growth were used for the incorporated areas. A Steering Committee, which includes chairpersons from all of the community planning and sponsor groups, has met over the past two years to establish regional goals, policies, and standards for future development of the unincorporated areas. Goals and policies for trails have not yet been developed.

### **Recreation Element and Trails**

State law does not mandate that trails be included in a General Plan. However, more and more counties and cities are recognizing the benefit of trails to their communities and are including trails within their general plans. A Trail Program is a part of the County of San Diego's existing General Plan. Trails are currently addressed within the Recreation Element of the General Plan as *Chapter 3: Riding and Hiking Trails Plan and Program*. This chapter includes relevant findings followed by a goal, which is reinforced by objectives, policies and action programs (see Appendix C).

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